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Neave Carroll, University of Washington, undergraduate student, “The LA Uprising on Camera: The Changing Mediascape and Its Influence on Conceptions of Race and Poverty”

Abstract: Using the LA Riots as a case study, this paper examines the impact broadcast journalism had on electoral politics in America by deconstructing the media discourse surrounding the event and reviewing the electorate’s response. Mainstream network broadcast transcriptions and archival footage represent the bulk of source material used. These sources suggest changes in journalistic methods, such as the adoption of the 24-hour news cycle and sensationalist reporting, as well as new technologies like the camcorder which led to the advent of eyewitness reporting, coalesced to influence politics in 1992. Urban crime was linked to an ailing economy, encouraging politicians to seek economic solutions for a ‘cycle of poverty’ that led to the event. However, coverage of the riots by African American and Korean-American sources challenge network media narratives and provided a different perspective on the LA Riots. They identified systemic racism as the main cause. These alternate sources undercut the politically-charged messages peddled through telecast news that largely served conservative political agendas. By weaving riot coverage into the broader history of 1990s American politics, this paper contends that the media discourse on the riots and race ultimately shaped political opinion. 1992 marked a new epoch in American mediascape evolution as narrative authority was partially ceded to citizens with cameras. Further, in understanding how media coverage of civil unrest in 1992 shaped political discourse 28 years ago also helps contextualize recent incidents of civil unrest, and how evolving media technology and journalism interact to shape views on race in political discourse.

The LA Uprising on Camera: The Changing Mediascape and Its Influence on Conceptions of  
Race and Poverty

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Using the LA uprising as a case study within the context of the 1992 election cycle, this paper analyzes the impact of recent changes in journalistic method on American views of race and urban poverty. These changes in journalistic method include: (1) the rise of cable news, (2) the adoption of the 24-hour news cycle, (3) the use of more sensationalist reporting tactics, and (4) the development of new technologies such as the camcorder that made possible eyewitness reporting and increased police accountability. These developments could and perhaps should have been a major impetus for positive social change. Instead, in the subsequent decades urban crime surged to the forefront of telecast news and print media discourse (and therefore political debate), which became dominated by racist and reactionary interpretations of communities of color on both sides of the aisle. Hence, pre-existing racist metanarratives undercut the power of a diversified mediascape to incite social change and inflammatory imagery and outmoded rhetoric only reaffirmed persistently problematic racist messages.

In order to understand what happened in Los Angeles in 1992, we need to examine the earlier and similar Watts Riot in the mid-1960s, perhaps the largest of a wave of similar urban uprisings that took place in the mid-1960s. Giving voice to Black frustration and defiance to the status quo, the majority of white Americans recoiled in horror at news reports of unrest and property destruction. How did the media get it so wrong?

During a sweltering August night in 1965, the predominantly Black neighborhood of Watts in southcentral Los Angeles erupted over frustrations of racial injustice. The inciting incident for the Watts uprising was a struggle between a white California highway patrolman and a twenty-one-year-old African American, Marquette Frye, whom the patrolman suspected of drunk driving.<sup>1</sup> During the altercation that ensued, bystanders like Frye's brother, mother, and an increasing number of Watts residents publicly challenged police authority, which they saw as

unfairly harassing Black residents. Police escalated the situation by arresting numerous protesters and using heavy-handed tactics, fueling more resistance. The ensuing public disorder lasted nearly six days, cost thirty-four lives and left a thousand injured. There were almost four-thousand arrests on top of tens of millions of dollars in property damage.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than giving voice to Black frustration, the mainstream media coverage of Watts only affirmed popular racist cultural assumptions about African Americans. News articles published in the immediate aftermath of the unrest linked the uprising to the findings of the recent ‘Moynihan Report,’<sup>3</sup> the centerpiece of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s commencement speech at Howard University in June that same year.<sup>4</sup> The report was framed as a policy document designed to uplift poor black families and correct past discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the report’s racist theory on multigenerational poverty was ill-received by liberals and civil rights activists alike, and came to be regarded as an indictment of African American culture.<sup>6</sup>

The Moynihan Report pathologized the culture of Black America, asserting that the irresponsibility of Black men and the breakdown of the nuclear family in African American neighborhoods were to blame for cyclical poverty in lieu of systemic factors. That is, as Johnson remarked at Howard University, “unless [African Americans] work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together—all the rest: schools, and playgrounds, and public assistance, and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation.”<sup>7</sup> Media coverage of Watts in effect echoed Moynihan’s rhetoric, allowing its inherent racism to have outsized influence on both the interpretation of the uprising but also on perceptions of race and poverty as well as public policy for decades. Twenty-seven years later, this same metanarrative influenced the now-diversified yet equally racist coverage of the LA uprising in the spring of 1992.

The LA uprising, much like the Watts uprising thirty years beforehand, was catalyzed by a racially-charged encounter between a Black man and the police. During the night of March 2, 1991, Rodney King was coming home with friends after attending a basketball game and having drunk throughout the evening.<sup>8</sup> While King sped along the road, two members of the California Highway Patrol spotted his car and gave chase; eventually, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Briseno cornered King. They then proceeded to brutally beat King; assaulting him with batons and kicking him repeatedly. Unbeknownst to officers, bystander George Holliday captured the incident on a camcorder. Holliday then turned that footage over to a local television station, KTLA, which broadcast the footage. The Cable News Network (CNN) picked up the tape from there, and broadcasted it nationally. In fact, the clip was aired so frequently and the image of King being beaten by the LAPD became so ubiquitous that CNN Vice President Ted Turner was quoted saying “television used the tape like wallpaper.”<sup>9</sup> Importantly, the widely circulated footage sparked a national debate about police brutality, centered on LAPD tactics.

When characterizing the LAPD during the 1990s, journalist Karen Grigsby Bates who researched the department’s culture defined the department’s style as “aggressive paramilitary policing with a culture that was mean and cruel, racist and abusive of force in communities of color, particularly poor communities of color.”<sup>10</sup> Following the circulation of the Holliday tape, many Angelenos seemed inclined to agree with the assessment; for instance, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a poll that determined that the LAPD was distrusted to a higher degree than they were in a similar poll conducted during 1979.<sup>11</sup> Amongst those polled, eighty-six percent had watched the “often-televised videotape” showing King being kicked and clubbed by uniformed officers, and ninety-two percent of respondents believed the LAPD had used excessive force.

Unfortunately, on 29 April, 1992, the four LAPD officers videotaped beating black motorist Rodney King were acquitted of excessive force charges levied against them. This controversial acquittal came on the heels of the much-maligned verdict in the trial of Soon Ja Du, a Korean American grocer who shot and killed an innocent Black teen, Latasha Harlins. Ja Du merely receiving probation for voluntary manslaughter.<sup>12</sup> Consequentially, between April 29th and May 4th, 1992, southcentral LA erupted into televised fury, and the civil unrest captured on camera during this time span would comprise the LA uprising.

Media coverage during the 1990s was far more diversified than it had been during the 1960s. This means that while television news coverage existed earlier, the new 24-hour news cycle of the early 1990s gave new life to media reporting. Launched in the late 1970s, CNN became the first television news network that operated on a 24-hour basis and continued to singularly do so into 1992.<sup>13</sup> To fill the time and increase viewership with their atypical format, CNN would sensationalize their coverage to hook viewers in. In addition, while initially oriented around breaking news coverage, Turner's network soon realized that it was more cost-effective and appealing to fill their endless hours of programming with the opinions of 'contributors' and guests.<sup>14</sup> This entrepreneurial development set a precedent for partisan coverage on news channels. Further, this new style of coverage favored more sensationalized topics and coverage. Sociologist Todd Gitlin has argued that because journalists of the era now favored government officials as guests and pundits this led to more racially charged event coverage skewed because narratives presented by networks absorbed "the officials' definitions of the situation," stressing lawlessness and disorder.<sup>15</sup> Such skewed framing of events favors bias and sensationalism.<sup>16</sup>

Notably, Holliday's footage serves as one of the more significant examples of eyewitness video reporting and is emblematic of the proliferation of hand-held video recorders during this

period that made such documentation by amateurs easier. At first appraisal, eyewitness videos of the LA uprising seemingly offset the skewed framing and sensationalist reporting endemic to cable news. First patented in 1980, the camcorder, and later the cellphone, “democratized” video by granting citizens the ability to access places the press could not, thus revolutionizing journalism.<sup>17</sup> In a *Los Angeles Times* article reflecting on the role of hand-held video cameras in the LA uprising, Robert Koehler describes a tense scene captured solely on camcorder that involves a standoff between neighbors and police over the origins of the looting and burning at 71st Street and Normandie before a man is eventually arrested. In stark opposition to biased, sensationalized cable network reporting, citizen reporters like Holliday could seemingly speak truth to power. They could potentially reshape the public presentation of conflicts or incidents with their record by casting themselves in the role of trustworthy witness.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is worth acknowledging that the archetypal journalistic news story is a crime story, and any resistance movement is ordinarily framed by sensationalist provocateurs as crime.<sup>19</sup> Cable news utilizing sensationalist spin could lucratively exploited shock journalism and crime for viewership. A *Los Angeles Times* news article detailed how one routine car chase earlier in 1992 was broadcast on almost every local television station. The week before, KCBS Channel 2, KNBC Channel 4, KABC Channel 7 and KCOP Channel 13 boarded their helicopters and went live with a border patrol chase of a shiny green pickup.<sup>20</sup> A few short years later and attesting to the popularization of this method of media consumption, *millions* of viewers watched the infamous O.J. Simpson car chase. Scholars of media history contend that media “generates and transmits representations of crime,” which audiences then engage with as consumers.<sup>21</sup>

The LA uprising serves as a case study for this phenomenon, with news networks sensationally reframing the behaviors exhibited by people under duress in a moment of social

crisis into consumable news.<sup>22</sup> In 1999, a federal report investigating media's impact on the public in emergency situations asserted that videotapes played a significant role in swaying public opinion because it was through this medium that violent images of the uprising were circulated, and "seared into the nation's psyche."<sup>23</sup> As discussed, television news exhibits a propensity for sensationalist coverage, and eyewitness videos were subsequently used to complement preset narratives. These narratives included LA being fully engulfed in flames and at the mercy of 'unruly' Black and Brown people. Concerns about this type of sensationalism spread, and even Mayor Tom Bradley requested that local LA stations return to their normal programming several nights into the uprising.<sup>24</sup> In part, the proliferation of visual technologies like the camcorder was problematic because these devices elevated the status of certain images, leading television viewers to interpret more readily what they saw as truth.<sup>25</sup>

The historically conservative *Los Angeles Times* regularly published stories that reinforced this racist metanarrative promoted by sensationalist cable news; stories that regularly cast people of color in villainous roles.<sup>26</sup> This trend was also evident during the LA uprising; in covering events, the *Los Angeles Times* published the headline "Looting and Fires Ravage LA: 25 Dead, 572 injured; 1000 blazes reported" above sensational images of violence and destruction while disregarding the community members suing for peace in letters to editors and calls for policy change.<sup>27</sup> Oppositely, LA's minority newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Korea Times*, featured stories that directly focused on the communities affected by the civil unrest in the city. One *Korea Times* writer even wrote a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* to critique the bigger news outlet's skewed coverage of events while simultaneously arguing that the metanarrative pushed by mainstream news consistently ignores the systemically racist factors at play.<sup>28</sup> This sentiment was echoed by some local politicians including

Representative Maxine Waters who, shrugging off critics pressuring her to denounce the uprising, directed her anger at systemic forces by declaring that the longstanding indifference by the political power structure as well as the persistent poverty of the inner city and a disinterested federal government.<sup>29</sup>

A presidential election was also unfolding during 1992, and it would be the first election in which CNN played a consequential role. The presidential race was fought between Democratic Governor of Arkansas, William “Bill” Clinton, Texas Republican and President George H. W. Bush, and the popular independent candidate, billionaire Ross Perot. The concurrent recession was at the forefront of political issues, arresting the attention of these candidates and heavily influencing political discourse throughout the election cycle. Notably, campaign strategist James Carville summed these priorities up with the now infamous televised quip, “it’s the economy, stupid.”<sup>30</sup> Enmeshed in these national conversations about economic recovery, welfare, and “urban crime,” however, was the race issue. Indeed, the problematic racist politics espoused in the Moynihan Report were evident in televised political rhetoric throughout the 1992 election cycle.

Ross Perot, for instance, committed a misstep in his own campaign when discussing the nation’s economic issues at a convention for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.). He frequently addressed his predominantly African American audience by saying “you people” or “your people,” which was interpreted by many to be racist.<sup>31</sup> Still, Perot accrued nearly nineteen percent of the popular vote—a feat for a third-party candidate in modern America. Many researchers attribute his measurable success to his television campaigns. A frequent guest on CNN, Perot savvily utilized cable news to amplify his economy-oriented political message in an appeal to the viewers eligible to vote.<sup>32</sup>

Both mainstream party nominees echoed Perot at points. Governor Bill Clinton purposefully and effectively courted black constituents with media appearances on popular news stations and talk-shows, yet also seemed to endorse the racist Moynihan metanarrative. Clinton's appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* wherein he charismatically performed a rendition of "Heartbreak Hotel" on the saxophone and joked around with the host functioned as a soundbite for the Democratic candidate's successful campaign.<sup>33</sup> In another televised campaign appearance, Clinton dropped by a daycare center in Washington, DC to speak and read to young African American children.<sup>34</sup> Yet Clinton also garnered notice through his middle-of-the-road approach to policy exemplified the media and political discourse regarding the LA uprising; in proffering new approaches to the "pervasive social problems of America's cities," Clinton argued that there is a 'third way,' between the two party stances.<sup>35</sup> In a news article deconstructing this third way, the presidential contender pushed this genial centrism by denouncing welfare and the social programs implemented during the Johnson administration. Deliberately or inadvertently, Clinton echoed the metanarrative which proved so pervasive, he contended that government programs "cannot solve deep-rooted social problems," and instead encouraged poor Americans (read African Americans) to shun welfare and "take responsibility for their own lives."<sup>36</sup> President George H.W. Bush, a Republican, when questioned on the topic of 'urban' crime during a debate, responded by scapegoating "deadbeat [Black] fathers" for the decline in urban America.<sup>37</sup> He thus disseminated the pathological interpretation of poverty's concentration in urban communities, contending that the traditional nuclear family would remedy the cycle of poverty.

As for the increasingly popular conservative assumptions regarding welfare, one of the main characteristics of this trend was the increasingly negative depiction of the poor, with many

continuing to attribute poverty to individualistic causes.<sup>38</sup> A *Washington Post* poll, conducted after the uprising, found that the belief in the Johnson-era ‘programs of the past’ having failed to solve the problems confronting cities was pervasive amongst Americans, Black and white. In fact, less than a third of those polled said public assistance programs designed to lift the poor helped disadvantaged Americans. Bill Clinton, a purported proponent of the popular “whole new approach,” was subsequently granted a fourteen-point lead over Bush when voters were asked which candidate “would do a better job of dealing with issues like race relations, poverty and the problems of the inner cities?”<sup>39</sup> Such voter sentiment reflected the success of Clinton’s campaign strategy that had the presidential contender making appearances on popular Black talk shows and playing live saxophone solos while voicing anti-welfare rhetoric. Ostensibly, what contributed to Clinton’s win in the 1992 election was his “whole new approach” strategy that had been popularized in the discourse about urban blight taking place in a diversified mediascape.

Today, eyewitness video reporting is a staple of most news networks and social media platforms, documenting police brutality for easy interpretation and accessible citation by the public. In the cases of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Jacob Blake, and many others, as well as the live-streaming and selfie-taking during the January 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, cellphone footage has proven instrumental in more recent the struggle against police brutality and white supremacy. The proliferation of citizen reporting, new technologies, and even newer platforms compose a unifying mechanism for social change in the modern age. The well-documented pattern of police brutality that eyewitness video has provided over the last few decades also underscores the need for a structural overhaul and reckoning with racial injustice. Without addressing the real problems afflicting communities of color, effective reform cannot be made. Media coverage in 1992 stimulated discourse on these issues, albeit for purportedly

dubious reasoning like ratings. However, it failed to solve the salient issues that created uprisings, leading to problematic political reform at the national, state, and local levels.

The early 1990s helped to usher in a new era of the American mediascape, granting greater narrative authority to citizens with cameras. Furthermore, in examining media portrayals of civil unrest and how they shaped political discourse twenty-eight years ago, contextualizing recent social upheaval becomes doable. Ever-evolving forms of media and journalism thus interact to formulate conceptions of race and poverty in media, political, and public discourse. However, in catechizing coverage of the LA uprising and situating it within the broader contexts of media evolution and social theory, this paper asserts that the metanarratives introduced in the 1960s were still influencing politics and public opinion in the 1990s. One would anticipate that a changing mediascape should have changed the public's opinion on urban crime, urban decay, and Black Americans for the better. Instead, the embedded behaviorist ideas that cable news, minority newspapers, and citizen reporting perpetuated reaffirmed the same narrow-aim solutions. Sensationalism sells, and the skewed news coverage helped to reform these metanarratives. Thus, the diversification of media does not reveal truth, and more media is not necessarily a boon when attempting to dismantle preconceived conceptions of race and poverty.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Fogelson "White on Black: A Critique of the McCone Commission Report on the Los Angeles Riots." *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (1967): 337-338.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Trans-action Social Science and Public Policy Report*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Naughton. "The Moynihan Report," 41.

<sup>5</sup> Susan D. Greenbaum. *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel Images about Poverty*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Naughton. "The Moynihan Report," 41.

<sup>7</sup> "President Lyndon B. Johnson Commencement Address at Howard University," c-span.org, 32:09. Accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?326895-1%2Fpresident-lyndon-b-johnson-commencement-address-howard-university>.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Linder, "The Rodney King Beating Trials," jurist.org, October 11, 2016, <https://www.jurist.org/archives/famoustrials/the-rodney-king-beating-trials/>.

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<sup>13</sup> Erik P. Bucy, Walter Gantz, and Zheng Wang, "Media Technology and the 24-Hour News Cycle," *Communication Technology and Social Change*, August 2014, 157-178.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Kosner. "REVIEW --- Books: Headlines, Nonstop --- Forty Years Ago, Ted Turner's Revolutionary Cable News Network Changed the Way America Gets Television News. what was Once a Half-Hour Nightly Appointment is Now Water from the Tap." *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2020, Eastern edition.

<sup>15</sup> Todd Gitlin. *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Katherine Cammarata. "The Watts Riots: A Contemporary Study of the News Coverage of Riots." Order No. 13849401, University of Missouri - Columbia, 2018. <https://search.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/watts-riots-contemporary-study-news-coverage/docview/2188043215/se-2?accountid=14784>.

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